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ABSTRACT

A study was designed (1) to test whether adult writing is superior to adult speech in terms of organization and content and (2) to assess college students' ability to discriminate between passages differing in quality. Written and spoken passages that compared and contrasted two entities were elicited from college students and adult professionals. Both written and oral versions of each passage were constructed and presented to college students, who rated the content and organization of 12 of these passages without knowing how or by whom they had been produced. Although composition instructors rated the passages written by professionals as higher in quality and better organized than the other three passage types (adult-oral, student-oral, and student-written), this difference was not detected by undergraduate students, who tended to prefer passages that had been produced orally. The modality in which a passage was presented to students did not affect quality judgments; students who read passages assessed the passages no more strictly than did students who listened to passages. (RL)

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Organization and Content in Writing and Speech

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Conventional wisdom has it that writing is better than speech, particularly in terms of organization. When we asked 39 undergraduates to speculate about the relative quality of written and spoken discourse, 61 percent thought writing would be better organized while only 20 percent favored speech. Psychologists who have tried to explicate the ways in which writing differs from speech have emphasized its greater explicitness, organization, and logical consistency (Bereiter, 1980; Bruce, Collins, Rubin, & Gentner, in press; Olson, 1977). The same assumption is implicit in developmental research contrasting speaking and writing skills. While younger children's speech is better organized than their writing (Scardamalia, in press), the two modes have been found to be equivalent in the middle school years (Hidi & Hildyard, 1980), and there is the expectation that although writing develops at a later age, it will eventually surpass speech in organization and quality. Although when considered in the abstract writing is expected to be better than speech, a different viewpoint emerges in the context of discussions concerning the inadequacy of college and high school students' writing. Some have suggested that college students are perfectly capable of producing well-reasoned, organized oral answers but are unable to demonstrate the same competence when called upon to answer in writing (Zollner, 1969).

Such concerns led to the present attempt to compare speech and writing produced by college students as well as those produced by a sample that could

be accepted as representing adult competence. Previous empirical comparisons of adults' speech and writing have focused on formal features such as word choice and grammaticality (Cayer & Sacks, 1979; Gruner, Kibler, & Gibson, 1967). Little information is available concerning more basic, global aspects of quality, perhaps because a number of problems complicate attempts to compare speech and writing. The two types of discourse are usually generated in different settings and for different purposes. If we want to know whether written and spoken discourse differ in organization and content quality, we need to equate their functions and the conditions under which they are produced. A second problem arises from the fact that people may not use the same standards in evaluating spoken and written discourse. We were interested in seeing whether the expectation that writing will be superior leads judges to impose stiffer criteria for written text. It seemed plausible that listeners may sometimes forget what has been said previously and assume that the speaker's present point follows from an earlier one. Readers, on the other hand, have the option of returning to earlier portions of the text to check for logical consistency and can apprehend more easily the organization of an entire passage.

The present study was designed to test whether adult writing is superior to adult speech in terms of organization and content while insuring that any observed differences were differences in quality rather than in criteria for rating speech and writing. Oral passages were transcribed and written passages tape recorded so that individual passages could be judged in both modalities by separate groups of raters.

A second purpose of the study was to assess college students' ability to discriminate between passages differing in quality. This issue was of interest because of its implications concerning the source of students'

writing problems. Within the information processing models of writing that currently dominate the literature (Flower, 1979; Hayes & Flower, 1980), failure to organize ideas is viewed as a consequence of having to deal with too many demands (for idea generation, correct spelling, grammaticality, and so on) at once (Collins + Gentner, 1980). If processing demands are the major cause for poor organization in student writing, students should be able to recognize different grades of organization in prose when they do not have to produce the writing themselves.

Method

Materials. An organizational structure commonly assigned in composition and public speaking classes is the comparison and contrast of two entities. We selected six such topics (e.g., high school versus college, disco versus rock music) so that the average adult would have something to say about at least one of them. Undergraduates were asked to choose a topic and either to speak for a few minutes or write a paragraph or two on it. They were given time to plan their passages and were allowed to make preparatory notes before writing or speaking into a tape recorder. In the same manner, passages were solicited from a group of adults chosen to represent a standard of adult competence, if not expertise. These were 12 adults holding graduate degrees and working in professions requiring both writing and public speaking. Figure 1 contains a sample passage spoken by an undergraduate, figure 2 contains a passage written by a professional.

The passages thus provided were divided into two sets, each containing six passages generated by college students (three oral and three written) and six by adult professionals (three oral and three written). The passages within each set were then arranged in two random orders, and an oral and a

written version of each of these four sets was produced. Two adult females each recorded two of the passage sets. For written passage sets, the passages were typed, one to a page. Obvious speech markers such as verbalized pauses ("um") and repetitions of immediately preceding words were removed from passages that originally had been produced orally. Spelling and blatant punctuation errors were corrected in passages that had been written.

Ten composition instructors, who did not know the original modality or producer of each passage, rated the passages on quality of content and organization.

Procedure. Fifty-two undergraduates in English composition classes served as subjects. Small groups of students either read or listened to the passage sets. Students were told that the people who had produced the passages had been instructed to compare and contrast two things. Nothing was said concerning who had produced the passages or the modality in which they had been generated. Students were asked to make two ratings for each passage, one for organization and one for content, using a scale ranging from 1 (very poor) to 6 (very good). They were asked to explain their reasons for the ratings they assigned.

After these ratings were collected, subjects were told that some of the passages had originally been spoken and some had been written, and that some had been produced by undergraduates and some by adult professionals. The students then went through the passages a second time, making judgments as to the original modality and whether a student or a professional had produced each.

Results and Discussion

Instructors' Evaluations.

Instructors' ratings of organization and content quality for the four types of passages are displayed in Table 1. Analyses of variance performed on these ratings revealed modality x producer interactions, with written passages being superior to spoken ones for professionals but not for undergraduates in terms of both organization and content, Fs(1, 8)=19.84 for organization and 16.02 for content.

Students' Quality Ratings.

When students were given these passages to judge, their ratings only partially matched those of the composition instructors.[1] Students did give higher ratings to the passages that had been produced by adult professionals, F(1, 35)=24.02 for content and 20.09 for organization, but they did not give higher ratings to the professionals' writing. In general, they tended to rate passages that had been produced orally higher than those that had been written. This effect was significant for the content ratings, F(1, 35)= 6.70 but was limited by a source x modality interaction, F(1, 35)= 6.01, with the tendency to assign higher ratings to spoken than to written ones being more pronounced for passages produced by undergraduates.[2]

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[1] Nine students did not rate all the passages on both dimensions. Data from these students were not included in the analyses of variance.

[2] There were no main effects for reception modality, passage set, or order.

Students also gave orally produced passages marginally higher ratings on organization, $F(1, 35) = 2.96$, $p < .09$, and this tendency was as strong for adult professionals' passages as for undergraduates' passages, $F < 1$ for the modality x source interaction.[3]

Thus the superiority of the passages written by professionals when compared to the other three types was not detected by student raters, who in fact preferred oral passages. This insensitivity to passage quality seemed to be more acute in the area of organization than in that of content. While average student content ratings for the 24 passages correlate .68 with experts' ratings, the two sets of organization ratings correlate only .49.

Ratings on the sample passages in figures 1 and 2 illustrate the difference between students' ratings and those of composition instructors. The two passages deal with the same topic and even make similar points. However, the passage written by a professional is much more concise and tightly organized. Instructors' ratings reflect this difference: while they gave the two passages similar ratings on content (2.67 for the passage spoken by a student and 2.83 for that written by a professional), they gave quite dissimilar ratings on organization (2.50 for the student oral passage, 4.33 for the professional written). Student raters, on the other hand, rated the passages quite similarly on both dimensions (4.38 and 4.33 for content; 4.57 and 4.90 for organization). The obvious difference between the two passages in terms of degree of

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[3]There were no main effects for reception modality, passage set, or order, but order did interact with producer, $F(1, 35) = 9.02$. The tendency for professionals' passages to get higher ratings was more marked in one set of passages.

structure is not reflected in student organization ratings.

In general, students' responses leave the impression that they are not making separate judgments about organization and content. The two sets of student ratings correlate .83, and a number of the explanations students gave for their organization ratings reflected a concern with content:

> "Writer can't make up mind whether there are any similarities."
>
> "I agreed with her."
>
> "Logical order is good except where they didn't full explain what degree of independence is granted upon entering college."

Another issue addressed in this study was the hypothesis that people use different criteria in judging the quality of written and spoken messages. If so, there should be differences in the ratings for the same passages depending on whether students read them or listened to them. As is evident in the means in Table 2 and verified in the analyses of variance on organization and content ratings, however, passages received equivalent ratings whether they were presented aurally or in writing, $Fs < 1$.

Judgments of Original Modality and Source. Analysis of the modality judgments revealed that students were no better than chance at discriminating which passages were originally spoken and which written (51 percent correct judgments). It appears that college students are quite poor at discriminating writing from speech when the two forms of discourse serve the same function and are presented in the same modality.

Students were more successful at judging whether the passages had been produced by students or professionals. This decision could often be made from content cues, and students were correct in 65 percent of these judgments, a level significantly better than chance, $Z = 2.16$.

Summary and Implications

As evaluated by experts, passages produced by adult professionals conformed to expectations in that their writing was superior to their speech. Passages produced by undergraduates, on the other hand, did not show this pattern. Such findings lead us to suspect that the general assumption that writing attains higher standards than speech must be qualified. Gould (1980) obtained a similar finding: contrary to their own expectations, adults' written letters were no better than their dictated ones.

The common assumption that writing is superior in quality is probably based on comparisons of nonequivalent situations and persons. Everyday oral discourse is contrasted with writing produced in formal situations where the writer expects to be evaluated and may spend considerable time planning and revising. When we think of text as contrasted to oral language, we are thinking of the writing of a select group of people. Developmental studies showing that children's writing is no better than their speech must be viewed in a somewhat different light if the same state of affairs predominates among adults.

With reference to our second area of concern, these results suggest that the difficulty college students have in structuring their writing is not just a product of processing limitations. If students have a hard time recognizing what composition instructors regard as superior organization, they are going to have problems structuring their own writing, no matter how much we reduce the other processing demands involved in writing.

Finally, the findings reported here argue against our original intuition that passages would be rated more severely when presented as writing. At least for relatively short discourse samples as used here, passages receive the same quality ratings whether they are heard or read.

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Table 1

Mean Quality Ratings for Spoken and Written Passages[a]

	Passage Type			
	Student Produced		Adult Professional Produced	
	Spoken	Written	Spoken	Written
Organization	3.28	3.28	3.17	4.29
Content	2.83	2.40	2.92	3.32

[a]Composition instructors rated passages on a scale ranging from 1 (very poor) to 6 (very good).

Table 2

Mean Student Organization and Content Ratings,
by Reception Modality and Passage Type[a]

	Passage Type			
	Student Produced		Adult Professional Produced	
	Spoken	Written	Spoken	Written
Organization Ratings				
Subject Group				
Heard Passages (n=24)	3.86	3.64	4.31	4.17
Read Passages (n=19)	3.84	3.54	4.42	4.19
Combined (n=43)	3.85	3.60	4.36	4.18
Content Ratings				
Subject Group				
Heard Passages (n=24)	3.85	3.35	4.08	3.93
Read Passages (n=19)	3.82	3.19	4.26	4.37
Combined (n=43)	3.84	3.30	4.16	4.12

[a]Passages were rated on a scale from 1 (very poor) to 6 (very good).

College and High School

To compare and contrast college and high school, I feel that in high school your expectations aren't as well-defined as in college. Those are personal expectations. There are also expectations of the people around you and your instructors in college that place you higher on the scale than in high school. And the work encompassed in college is much more distinct; in high school it's more general studies that you have to know--more general, not quite specific, things. In college there's a lot more written work, a lot more student-dependent work, where you have to do more reading on your own--not just the text given in the class, but you also have to use other texts and other forms of obtaining the knowledge. In high school, there was more of a strict order in the books you read. You're given certain books, you have to read those books and that's mostly all you have to do.

In college you're more determined towards a certain goal, whereas in high school there's not that much of a determined goal. You don't really know in high school exactly where you're going to be heading and you may even choose some place you're heading, but once you get into college find that those goals are blocked and you can't actually make it to that area that you're heading for. You have a more defined picture of what you're going to want out of life when you're in college. You're far older than you are in high school, and there's many more responsibilities on you as a legal adult in this society, even though some people never attain certain guidelines of being an adult.

In high school it's more of a group that you hang out with, a certain circle of people that has a very big effect on the way you act, the way you look at different parts of the society, whereas in college you're more individualized. You're not seen as part of a class, you're seen as a number or a name and you're on your own. There's not really anyone--there is help that you can get, but it's more of an individualized effort in college, whereas in high school there's not much of an individualized effort.

To finish off, there's a lot more of a pressure on you as a student to perform in college than in high school, where there's not too many pressures. You don't have to do that much work to get through in high school. You can not do work and still end up with an average grade. But there's more of a push in college that you have to do the work on your own and there's really no one that can make you do it, but if you don't then you just don't make it. That's a major difference between college and high school.

Figure 1. Sample passage spoken by an undergraduate.

College and High School

College and high school are in many ways separate worlds unto themselves. Whereas the college student has great latitude on planning his or her time, the high school student must obey rather strict schedules. In college, many students have their eyes opened for the first time by the heterogeneity of an academic community; high school, in contrast, usually offers a more homogeneous atmosphere that is on the continuum from elementary and junior high.

Yet, college and high school life share some rather fundamental characteristics. The classroom examination usually remains the focus of student academic existence throughout the high school and undergraduate periods. In addition, the fundamental skills of reading and writing play a crucial role in both. One who has not mastered them will certainly find high school courses to be as insurmountable as those later faced at a university.

Figure 2. Sample passage written by a professional.